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ABSTRACT

The National Education Association's "Operation Rescue" employs a two-tiered approach to combating the dropout rate: the first approach is research and information sharing, the second is to facilitate direct action at the local level through a grants program to fund dropout prevention programs in the schools. In order to focus Operation Rescue for greatest effectiveness, dropout prevention programs in operation were surveyed and classified, and information exchanges were held in four cities, with over 300 participants, including representatives from 15 national organizations. Resulting from the information exchanges is a publication, "A Blueprint for Success," that sets forth principles that bring into focus issues, attitudes, and concerns essential for planning and implementing a successful dropout prevention program. Sixteen grants totaling approximately $450,000 have been awarded to teachers across the country. All the programs are designed on the local level, have strong educational components, and build collaborative networks with other service agencies. (MLF)

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OPERATION RESCUE: Reaching At-Risk Students through Teacher Initiatives

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OVERVIEW

Operation Rescue, The National Foundation for the Improvement of Education's (NFIE) dropout prevention program addresses the dropout crisis by focusing its resources at the classroom level. The programs Operation Rescue support and the approach NFIE advocates begin with teacher leadership in developing programs that meet the needs of at-risk students. The programs/teachers must then reach beyond the classroom to build collaborative partnerships with other members of the community, with social services agencies, local business and government, with parents and other concerned individuals. NFIE believes that starting at the school-building level, working with teachers,administrators, and educational support personnel, lays the foundation for an effective dropout prevention program capable of reaching out to the community to mobilize additional support.

Operation Rescue employs a two-tiered approach in combating the tragically high dropout rate in our nation. The first approach is research and information gathering to facilitate the sharing of information on dropout programs and to stimulate new dropout prevention efforts. The second approach is to facilitate direct action at the local level through a grants program to fund dropout prevention programs in the schools. The grants program serves to empower teachers to assume leadership positions in dropout prevention and to leverage the support of collaborative agencies in the communities.

In 1985 the National Education Association issued a call to action and created Operation Rescue for dropout prevention, with $1,700,000 for a direct grants program and the beginning of an endowment from which to fund other grants programs of similar importance.

In order to focus Operation Rescue most sharply for greatest effectiveness for direct action, NFIE began a research project to learn what works in dropout prevention. NFIE surveyed dropout prevention programs in operation nationwide, classified different types of programs, and planned Operation Rescue Information Exchanges in four cities, with a National Information Exchange to synthesize the results.

In these four local information Exchanges, over 300 practitioners in a wide variety of fields participated. They all, in some form or another, were working with at-risk students and dropouts. They included teachers, counselors, principals, students who had dropped out or reentered, directors of dropout prevention programs, local and state superintendents, local and state board of education members.

social workers, parents, researchers, business leaders, local government representatives, criminal justice personnel, and other support services. In addition, fifteen national organizations sent representatives to the Operation Rescue Information Exchanges.

NFIE sought information about successful components of dropout prevention programs, barriers to success with effective strategies to overcome them, and lessons learned from experience that would be helpful to others developing new programs.

NFIE and representatives of the collaborating national organizations shared with each other what was learned in the regional Information Exchanges during the Operation Rescue National Information Exchange in Washington, D.C., May, 1986. A Blueprint for Success is the result of all the Information Exchanges.

A Blueprint for Success is a set of principles that brings focus to issues, attitudes, and concerns essential for planning and implementing a successful dropout prevention program. The principles are as follows:

1. Believing the Impossible Possible. A clearly articulated VISION is the beginning for an effective dropout prevention program.

Committed, creative leadership is needed that enables the belief in the impossible, the taking of risks, the chancing of failure, the unrelenting persistence to begin again and to keep trying with different approaches until they succeed.

NFIE heard those working with at-risk students tell us that they must "believe that we can make a difference." We need to "act as visionary leaders -- remove current barriers to realizing what is possible." We must "convey the vision to the students to instill hope for the future."

When a teacher or teachers have a vision of what should be done to help students stay in school, they must spread that vision and lead others into it. Teachers must believe that they can make a difference.

2. Restoring the Human-Centered Base. The human connection is all important as a prerequisite for success in meeting the needs of those students who are at risk of dropping out of school.

The statement most often repeated in the Information Exchanges was, "establish a human connection with the student -- care." And we heard, "make students fell wanted. help them care for someone else." NFIE heard repeatedly

that outreach to parents is essential for them to become allies: "Expect that parents' contributions will be valuable. Provide realistic opportunities for parents to get involved."

Teachers can lead in restoring this human connection with students by breaking standard patterns that focus on the group and, instead, develop one-to-one relationships with students and reach out to parents.

3. Interactive Intersections. Collaboration is required to provide total and comprehensive services to the total person.

Neither the educators nor the community nor the family can do what is necessary alone. We all need to work together for the individual student's achievement and growth. We were told to search for collaborators with the commitment and the flexibility to work effectively with the students: "Act in collaboration as an opener of doors, a developer of talent, a trainer, a coach, a sponsor, a positive role model, a mentor."

Teachers cannot do it alone. But they are in a unique position to serve as a catalyst for bringing together the collaborative partners who can address the many factors which contribute to students dropping out.

4. The Only Axis. Student-centered education involves the uninvolved, reduces the risk of students' dropping out, and enables them to become productive in society.

The sooner we can intervene with at-risk students, the better our chances for success. We were told emphatically, "begin at least in elementary school -- high school is too late for too many." We heard much emphasis on student development; "Enable students' self-image and self-esteem to grow." We were encouraged to "help students grow emotionally and socially as well as academically." And we were warned, "develop positive peer culture to counteract negative street culture."

In identifying students at risk, we were told to "involve teachers as members of a team identifying students who are at risk." Identification of at-risk students is all too often an administrative decision based on students' academic and attendance records, with little involvement of teachers and other personnel who work with the students. Human judgment is often more reliable than records. Teachers and others in collaboration need to be brought into the identification process for early intervention.

5. Local Traffic Only. The classroom level is the essential focal point for effective dropout prevention programs, with local building management and total participation.

Top-down programs and programs managed and delivered beyond the local school can be diffuse, lack to human connections, and lack the personalized approach essential to motivate and meet the needs of at-risk students. Collaborative decision making at the school building level is essential from design, to delivery, to accountability of the program.

If the individual needs of at-risk students are to be met at the school building level, teachers and others in collaboration with them need greater decision making roles in the school. Teachers need to be involved in the restructuring of schools for personalized curriculum and personalized instruction to meet the needs of at-risk students.

6. Empowering All to Help. Training must be a whole school and community phenomenon.

Training involves all people working with students at at risk -- teachers, principals, counselors, community participants, business leaders, volunteers, parents, service providers, and other collaborators. With a focus on the student, we heard, "Increase understanding of adolescent development and behavior so that collaborators can meet students' emotional, social, and medical needs."

Not only teachers, but all those collaborating on the team working for at-risk students need ongoing training -- not just isolated inservice days, or one-time training sessions, but ongoing interactive training enabling all collaborators to work with each other more effectively and thus to work more effectively with at-risk students.

7. Mine and Ours. Empowerment of collaborators and students will result from their sense of ownership of their dropout prevention programs.

To empower collaborators, NFIE was told, "Give everyone a chance to invest in the school. Enable everyone to find fulfillment through giving what they know and do best." For the greater goal of student empowerment, we were told, "See that all students succeed -- that's our mission." Listen for students to say, "I was finally heard. " And listen for the student to say, "I've done it. I'm ready."

When teacher and other collaborators are empowered to work effectively with students, they can reach the primary goal

of empowering the students -- enabling them to have the knowledge, skills, and confidence to meet the challenges they will face and society will face in the future.

The Blueprint provides the key elements. It cannot provide the step-by-step implementation activities because they must be developed by local teachers and community leaders in relation to the differing realities of their communities. Such local tailoring is essential for the educational system to provide quality education in harmony with the needs of the community. Then and only then will all students have the opportunity to realize their potential.

Following the Information Exchanges and the publication of A Blueprint for Success, NFIE began awarding grants to local teachers associations for collaborative efforts in dropout prevention at the local school and community level. Sixteen grants totaling approximately $450,000 have been awarded to teachers across the country. These grants implement the principles in the Blueprint. They raise the professional image of teachers and invigorate the school community.

The projects range from in-school day care and child development center for parenting students, to one-on-one mentorship of at-risk students by older adults. All are designed on the local level, have strong educational components, and build collaborative networks with other service agencies. Most importantly, all are projects which help at-risk students overcome the barriers to their educational success and gives them the support they need to try to realize their potential and to lead independent, self-directed lives.

Although each grant is unique, there are striking similarities among them as they embody the principles of A Blueprint for Success. NFIE is learning much from the experience of these teacher-led programs in the various sites. Teachers are using leadership skills beyond anything possible in an isolated classroom. And they are integrating their experience into the entire community.

Some of the reports coming back to NFIE from the grants are strong testimonies of the effectiveness of teacher leadership in dropout prevention.

A teacher who is the project director for one Operation Rescue grant reported about the improved relationships with both the school administration and the community:

> "...in the district we have validity, we are real people, we brought in the money...They step out of the office to speak to us...they call us by name and

everybody in the building knows who we are. In twelve years no one knew my name...now they know. Plus, we speak in the community a lot. The business and corporate leaders are very impressed. We have an opportunity to at least present our case to someone;they are ready to listen to us, to be educated about what we area doing."

From another teacher leader directing an Operation Rescue grant, we heard more about the increased credibility with the community:

"We proved to people in the community that we have good ideas and that we can do something to solve local problems but that we need the autonomy to do something about those problems. You can't blame the schools for everything and then tie their hands behind their backs so they can't take care of the solutions..."

These are but a few of the reports that are coming back. These teachers, working in collaboration with school administrators and leaders in their communities, are making great strides in combating the dropout problem.

APPROACH

Tackling the dropout problem by this two-tiered approach, (research and action) allows for the development of the most effective kinds of dropout prevention programs. Armed with the best information on effective dropout prevention programs, local project directors design programs to match the needs of the local at-risk population. These programs have the greatest chance for success.

SCOPE OF IMPACT

Operation Rescue is both national in scope and local in impact. The Blueprint has been used by policy-makers and programs designers alike across the nation. The grants program, while primarily focusing on the areas that have received the funding, also serve as demonstration projects that encourage others to implement dropout prevention programs in their own communities. The grants act as leverage for garnering additional support from businesses and community organizations, and they inspire teachers on the local level to step to the front as leaders in this national effort to achieve educational success for all students.